

## Using Group Supervision for Undergraduate Dissertations: A Preliminary Enquiry into the student experience

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### Abstract

This paper explores the student experience of the use of individual and group supervisory strategies with students undertaking their undergraduate dissertation on a social work programme.

The findings indicate that small, supervisor led groups may be an effective mode for undergraduate dissertation supervision. This preliminary study suggests that there may be advantages of the peer group approach including: a higher rate for completion on time; greater student engagement maintained during the process and less 'failure driven' learning. The students' results suggest that there is no detrimental effect on performance.

**Keywords:** Dissertation Supervision, Small Groups, Student Experience

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ISSN 1750-8428 (online) [www.pestlhe.org.uk](http://www.pestlhe.org.uk)

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## **Introduction**

In the UK, the majority of undergraduates undertake a dissertation as part of their studies. The dissertation is a major piece of independent study that usually forms a substantial part of the final year studies and can play a significant role in determining their degree classification (Harrison & Whalley, 2006). On our social work programme the dissertation is taken in the final year, has a 10,000 word limit and comprises 25% of the final year marks. The students complete the dissertation over the whole academic year and have to balance this extended piece of work with the demands for other written work and their social work practice placements.

An undergraduate dissertation is likely to be the most significant piece of work that a student completes during a degree programme (Todd, Bannister & Clegg, 2004). In social work, the dissertation requires students to utilise the knowledge from both their university teaching and their social work practice placements. The dissertation is often the first opportunity for undergraduate students to build on knowledge they have already gained and then undertake a substantial piece of independent study (Rowley & Slack, 2004).

“The challenge in the undergraduate dissertation is to provide sufficient support to cultivate autonomy while recognising that many students may not feel fully prepared for this form of study” (Todd, Bannister & Clegg, 2004, p. 336).

What teaching and learning approaches can be used to support undergraduate students in the difficult task of their undergraduate dissertation? The task can be daunting in scope, and researchers report that students find difficulty in deciding on their topic, accessing materials, managing their time and worrying about whether they can succeed in the task (I’Anson & Smith, 2004; Harrison & Whalley, 2006; Robson, 2006).

An undergraduate dissertation evidences an integration of knowledge into a conceptual framework. Developing autonomous adult learning requires a move from passive absorption to an active reflective process. Hayes and Stratton (2003) propose a definition of learning in professional practice as: A relatively permanent change in knowledge, behaviour or understanding that results from experience. This is highly

relevant to social work students endeavouring to integrate theoretical modes and practice experiences, and particularly pertinent to their dissertation study.

Managing larger numbers of students has encouraged innovative approaches to the processes of both teaching and assessment including: the use of posters for assessing students (Akister & Kim, 1998); problem-based learning, in large group teaching, to move the focus of learning from the teacher to the student (Gibbs, 1992; Akister, 2001); the development and application of the Patchwork Text for formative learning in groups rather than the one-to-one personal tutorial (Scoggins & Winter, 1999; Akister 2003, 2005); the use of a case study approach in small peer groups to promote autonomous learning (Backx, 2008) and the use of the Patchwork Text with groups of students undertaking a Master's Dissertation (Maisch, 2003).

With increasing numbers of students on the BA Social Work Programme, we were seeking ways to manage the supervision of the undergraduate dissertation within existing staff resources. One option was to supervise students in a group. As Jackson and Prosser (2005) state, many educationalists advocate small group teaching in higher education as a means of developing higher cognitive skills, but there are few reports of the implementation of such teaching. We decided to examine the effectiveness of individual and group supervision from the perspectives of the student experience and the learning outcomes.

The accepted mode for supervising dissertations is one-to-one supervision, but the use of group supervision with Master's Dissertation students (Maisch, 2003) indicated the possibility that students might benefit from a group supervisory experience in terms of greater support from the peer group and of decreasing the isolation students can experience when working on dissertations. Todd, Bannister and Clegg (2004) have reported on social science students undertaking a dissertation in the final year of their degree and found that, while students valued the autonomy and ownership that they felt in relation to their dissertations, they also experienced considerable challenges, particularly in relation to 'time'. The support offered by group supervision may help with such challenges.

Autonomous learning or 'knowing when to withdraw the scaffold' of support (Wisker & Brown, 1996, p.119) is a vital consideration when planning dissertation supervision. The learning group established for the dissertation module provided a, "myriad [of] opportunities for sharing, learning, supporting, challenging, joint action, role modelling and relationship building..." (Brown, A. cited in Davies, M. (ed.) 1997, p.223).

The study reported here was designed to elicit student feedback about the experience, including their expectations prior to beginning the dissertation. We encountered some difficulties in gaining ethical approval as there was concern that students might be disadvantaged by not receiving one-to-one supervision as this is the traditional mode. We were able to satisfy the ethics committee (see Ethical Approval below) and undertook the study using a combination of either individual or group supervision supported by workshops.

## **Sample**

Small tutor-led group supervision was used for 48 students, with 6 students in each group. The remaining 18 students received individual supervision with each dissertation supervisor randomly allocated 2-3 students. Students were not given a choice of supervision mode. All other support aspects of the dissertation process were the same, including use of a comprehensive workbook (Akister & Williams, 2007), supporting workshops and a dissertation co-ordinator responsible for meeting with any students who were experiencing difficulties. The use of a comprehensive workbook is common amongst UK institutions (Harrison & Whalley, 2006).

The dissertation module runs over an academic year. The students were asked to complete semi-structured questionnaires anonymously: an initial questionnaire identifying preparedness, aspirations and concerns (see Appendix 1); a repeat of the initial questionnaire at the mid-point questionnaire monitoring the reality of the task and identifying changes in aspirations or concerns, and a final questionnaire following completion of their dissertation and reflecting on the experience. A focus group was held, after the hand-in, to give students an opportunity to discuss their responses to the final questionnaire.

Thus, students were given questionnaires at the initial dissertation workshop; mid-way through the dissertation and at hand-in. For the initial questionnaire, the response rate from the group supervision students was 63% (n=31) and from the individually supervised students, 58% (n=11). At the mid-point the response rate from the group supervision students was 58% (n=28) and from the individually supervised students, 77% (n=14). At the stage of the final questionnaire, only 2 from the individually supervised students replied and only 6 attended the focus groups, all from the group supervised students. This was due to late submissions and the design of the final phase of the project which occurred after the students had completed their studies and left the university. Because of the poor response rate to the final questionnaire and focus group this data will not be included in the analysis. We plan to replicate the study and will redesign the final stage to try and improve the response rate.

The students who responded were equally divided between the age groups 20-29, 30-39 and 40-49, with one student over 50 years of age. Ninety per cent of the students were female and 10% reported having a disability with 5% having special needs. For 17% of the students, English was not their first language and 10% of the group had undertaken a dissertation before.

## **Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval was applied for through the University Ethics Committee. Initially, concern was expressed by the committee that the students might be disadvantaged by the group mode, given that the one-to-one supervision for dissertations has come to be accepted as the ideal supervision strategy. For this reason, we created the role of dissertation co-ordinator who would be available to any student having difficulty in the group context or wishing to move to one-to-one supervision.

The process of gaining approval from the ethics committee was helpful both in terms of ensuring that students were not disadvantaged by changes in practice and also in highlighting the extent to which the one-to-one mode has become established as the 'gold standard' for dissertation supervision, emphasising the need for us to evaluate the use of the group supervision strategy.

## Questionnaire Analysis

The findings reported here are based on the analysis of the initial and mid-point questionnaires and students' grades, and are related to the number of candidates who completed the dissertation on time. The analysis is between the cohorts at each time point.

From the first questionnaire we ascertained the preparedness of students for the dissertation by asking whether they had decided on their topic area and who they had discussed this with. A significant difference between the cohorts at this early stage was identified with 97% of the students in group supervision and only 75% of the students in individual supervision having decided on their dissertation topic (Fishers Exact Test,  $p0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 4.7$ ,  $n=42$ ,  $df=1$ ). In addition, 47% of the students in Group Supervision and only 8% of the students in Individual Supervision had discussed this with their personal tutors (who support their learning through the entire 3 year programme, as distinct from their dissertation supervisors) (Fishers Exact Test,  $p0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 5.4$ ,  $n=42$ ,  $df=1$ ).

The differences in preparedness, at the outset, may be an important factor in the process of undertaking the independent study required in a dissertation. Analysis of student satisfaction questionnaires by Prosser (2006), indicates that the characteristics of the students at the outset of any programme of study are critical to their capacity to utilise the learning opportunities.

## ***Aspirations for Learning***

While the cohorts start off with similar hopes for their dissertations, by the mid-stage these are significantly different in respect of their interest in their topic and their hopes for developing their writing skills and learning about themselves. At the outset, 97% of the students in group supervision and all those in individual supervision hoped to learn more about their topic, in contrast to the mid-stage where this has risen to 100% in group supervision and only 85% in individual supervision (see Table 1). A significant difference between the cohorts also appears in relation to developing writing skills, with 79% of the students in group supervision and 43% of those in individual supervision reporting this as a hope at the mid-stage; and in relation to learning about themselves with 86% of the students in group supervision and 57% of those in individual

supervision recording this as an aim (see Table 1). The reasons for this are not clear. It could be that those in individual supervision feel that they have already developed these skills or it could reflect less engagement with the overall task.

It appears that studying and sharing in a group keeps the students engaged with their topic, whereas the students who have one-to-one supervision by the mid stage are less enthusiastic about the topic in its own right and their interest in developing other skills is less. This would be congruent with Prossers' findings from extensive research into student evaluation that those who begin their studies less prepared become preoccupied with meeting the requirements and use surface rather than depth approaches to their learning. These students tend to be more critical of the teaching they receive and to feel overburdened (Prosser, 2006).

**Table 1.** What students hoped to learn from their dissertation module

	<b>Initial Q GS %(n=31)</b>	<b>Initial Q IS %(n=11)</b>	<b>Midpoint Q GS %(n=28)</b>	<b>Midpoint Q IS %(n=14)</b>
More about my topic	97	92	100 <sup>*1</sup>	85
How to do a literature review	93	92	85	72
How to research a topic	86	92	75	78
How to write a research proposal	76	83	82	78
How to develop my writing skills	77	75	79 <sup>*2</sup>	43
About myself as a learner	77	92	86 <sup>*3</sup>	57

(Fishers Exact Test <sup>\*1</sup>  $p < 0.1$ ,  $\chi^2 = 4.2$ ,  $n = 42$ ,  $df = 1$ ; <sup>\*2</sup>  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 5.4$ ,  $n = 42$ ,  $df = 1$ ;

<sup>\*3</sup>  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 4.2$ ,  $n = 42$ ,  $df = 1$ )

(GS= Group Supervision; IS= Individual Supervision; Q= Questionnaire)

***Barriers Identified and Skills Needed for the Dissertation Process***

At the outset, we asked all the students (n=42) about their concerns in starting their dissertation. There were no significant differences between the groups in their responses to the questions about barriers and skills. Students were worried about 'time management' (67%) and 'ability to structure the dissertation' (90%). They were also concerned about whether their 'library skills' (67%) and 'writing skills' (77%) were adequate. The need for these skills is apparent and closely relates to the barrier they perceived in completing the dissertation. By the mid-stage, they remained concerned about structuring their time and about structuring the dissertation.

Throughout their third year, these students undertake 100 day practice placements and there is enormous pressure on managing their time and so its management is an understandable difficulty. It is of interest that, even at the mid-stage, with workshops and supervision they still remained concerned about how to structure their dissertation. This may reflect the nature of undertaking such a large piece of work and the difficulty, even with guidance, of dealing with the volume of material generated.

***Students' Views of the Dissertation at the Initial and Mid-way Stages***

There was only one significant difference reported in response to the questions about the students' views of the dissertation project. This was in response to knowing what they wanted to do. While most students had identified their topic, a significant number of those in the individually supervised cohort had not done so (42%) which suggests that the students in this cohort are less prepared for this element of their studies (see Table 2).

Initially, most students were excited about the freedom to select their area of study (58% of the students in group supervision; 70% of the students in individual supervision) despite being concerned about how they would get it all done (67% of the students in group supervision; 91% of the students in individual supervision). Interestingly, before starting, very few students thought that the dissertation would enhance their professional development (see Table 2).



**Table 2.** Student views of the dissertation project

	<b>Initial Q GS %(n=31)</b>	<b>Initial Q IS %(n=11)</b>	<b>Midpoint Q GS %(n=28)</b>	<b>Midpoint Q IS %(n=14)</b>
Excited to be studying a topic of my choice	58	70	57	43
Looking forward to studying independently	30	50	18	14
Don't know what I want to do	7*	42	7	14
How will I get it all done	67	91	71	92
It will enhance my professional development	19	6	64	42

(Fishers Exact test: \*  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 7.56$ ,  $n=42$ ,  $df=1$ )

(GS= Group Supervision; IS= Individual Supervision; Q= Questionnaire)

By the mid-stage, the percentage of individually supervised students who were excited about studying a topic of their choice had decreased from 70% to 43%. The proportion of those students in group supervision who were excited about studying a topic of their choice remained stable, changing from 58% to 57%. Both groups are less enchanted with learning independently and still concerned about getting it all done. The other interesting change between the two time points is the realisation by many of the students that the dissertation might well enhance their professional development (64% of the students in group supervision; 42% of the students in individual supervision, see Table 2).

### ***Possible Support Structures***

At the outset, students thought that the workshops, the supervisions, peer group support, their personal tutor and family and friends would support them through the

dissertation process (see Table 3). By the mid-stage all the students have found their supervision sessions to be clearly the most important source of support (71% of the students in group supervision; 78% of the students in individual supervision). For those students in group supervision, their personal tutors were also an important source of support (68% of the students in group supervision; 36% of the students in individual supervision, see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Possible sources of support for the dissertation project

	<b>Initial Q GS %(n=31)</b>	<b>Initial Q IS %(n=11)</b>	<b>Midpoint Q GS %(n=28)</b>	<b>Midpoint Q IS %(n=14)</b>
Peer Group support	73	75	61	57
Family / friend support	70	50	46	28
Workshops	80	92	57	43
Supervision sessions	83	83	71	78
Practice teacher	56	42	28	21
Personal tutor	76	75	68*	36

(Fishers Exact Test: \*  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 3.93$ ,  $n = 42$ ,  $df = 1$ )

(GS= Group supervision; IS= Individual Supervision; Q= Questionnaire)

The difference in use of family and friends for support at the mid-stage approaches statistical significance (46% of the students in group supervision; 28% of the students in individual supervision, see Table 3) and it can be seen that, again, this is less of a feature for the individually supervised cohort and, overall, less important than students had imagined at the outset.

Clearly, the source of help identified as most important, by all students, is the supervision experience, followed by the personal tutor and peer groups for those in group supervision. The group supervision cohort appears to have accessed a wider

range of help and this may reflect the less individualised experience in the group supervision.

## **Outcomes**

### ***What happens at the hand-in stage?***

For those in group supervision, 94% of the students handed their dissertations in on time. For those in individual supervision, 52% of the students handed their dissertations in on time.

This is a markedly differing outcome from a process which, as far as the student experience is concerned, had few significant differences. However, the nature of these differences may be quite critical and the whole experience is underpinned by different supervision modes. Thus, although the students appear equally happy with their experience of supervision, the two different approaches seem to generate very different outcomes.

### ***Did the students who handed in on time achieve their expected grades?***

When the marks for the dissertation are compared with the students' marks for the other modules in the final year there are no significant differences, with the spread of marks for any one student being less than 12 marks. Thus, the marks achieved by those handing in on time are in the expected range.

As already noted above, due to the fact that we tried to collect the final questionnaire and run a focus group after the students had handed in their dissertations and had left the university, only returning for their graduation, we had very poor returns at the final stage. Consequently although we are able to compare their experiences at the outset and mid-point with their results, we are not able to have a full picture of their views on completion.

A further limitation is that we cannot be sure of the mechanisms operating in relation to some of the questions. Are students in individual supervision less interested in developing their writing skills at the mid-point because they have already gained confidence in this through their supervision or is there some other reason. Further research is needed to explore these mechanisms.

## **Discussion**

Analysis of student satisfaction surveys suggests that beneath reported satisfaction scores the students' preparedness to study and their conceptualisation of their subject determine their capacity to make use of the learning experiences offered (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996; Trafford & Leshem, 2002; Prosser, 2006). Autonomous adult learning requires a move from passive absorption to an active reflective process, from being the recipient of teaching to directing their own learning.

Our study found that more students receiving tutor-led group supervision handed the dissertation in on time and were better prepared for the dissertation at the outset. So, why do those in groups seem more prepared? This could be to do with the motivational aspects of the group dynamics and not wanting to be left behind. It is easy to hypothesise that this preparation is related solely to the nature of the supervision mode. However, the preparedness of the students between the two cohorts was different at the outset and, based on the research cited above, this is clearly a factor in the capacity of the students to make use of the learning environment and may be related to the competitiveness generated by group dynamics.

It appears that the management of dissertation students, using a small tutor-led group supervision approach enables students to retain their enthusiasm for their studies (see Table 1) and to complete their work on time.

We suggest that the interactive nature of the small group experience decreases students' isolation and motivates the students through the sharing and interaction of their supervision group. We also note from talking to the tutors that students did not want to be left behind and had made comments to the tutor like: "I don't want to be the only one who doesn't finish on time." The tutor led small group sharing and

competitiveness helps students to keep on target. In the individual supervision mode the student mainly relates to their supervisor and may not be aware of the experiences of other students. With the many demands on their time, they can fall behind without realising that they are doing so.

As a staff team we have discussed the experience of using differing supervision approaches and there is a question, which we need to address in future studies, of the amount of supported time on task and the timing of supervisions. By their nature the supervision groups have to occur as timetabled whereas the individual sessions are easier to reschedule. Anecdotally, it seems students often cancel one-to-one supervisions and seek more support in the latter stages of the process. If true, then part of the relative success of the group supervision may lie in keeping students on task throughout the whole year and avoiding condensing studies near to the hand-in date.

## **Conclusions**

Using the student experience and grades, we have looked at two different methods of dissertation supervision, individual and small group, to consider whether tutor-led group supervision can provide a suitable learning opportunity for students undertaking an undergraduate dissertation.

Surprisingly, considering the long established mode of individual supervision for this type of study we found no disadvantages to the group approach. Students in group supervision used a wider range of support and the evidence from their marks is that there is no detrimental effect on performance. There is some indication that there may even be advantages in the approach including keeping on target and completing on time.

As a note of caution, whilst groups are a resourceful mechanism for learning they can also be a source of intense rivalry, competitiveness and conflict. This can be a good force in that it can galvanise some individuals to do well but it can also act as a demoralising agent for others.

These results are based on one cohort and we realise that it is necessary to repeat the study and also to investigate the 'preparedness' of students for the dissertation and to research the staff experience. We feel that the indications of the potential for group supervision are important to disseminate and re-test and we hope to include Masters Dissertations and work with other institutions to increase our understanding of the processes. In conclusion, the indications are that using small, supervisor led peer groups may be an effective mode for the supervision of undergraduate dissertations.

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## Appendix 1      DISSERTATION EVALUATION PROJECT

**Questionnaire 1: Please tick all boxes that apply to you.**

**SID Number** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age**      ☐      **Sex**      Male / Female

**Ethnic background** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disability**      Yes / No \_\_\_\_\_

**Special Needs**      Yes / No \_\_\_\_\_

**English first language** Yes / No

1. Have you ever done a dissertation before      Yes / No

2. Have you decided on your dissertation topic?      Yes/No

If Yes:

What is your topic? \_\_\_\_\_

Has anyone helped you decide on this e.g. practice teacher? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you discussed this with your second year tutor? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What do you hope to learn from the dissertation module?

More about my topic	
How to do a literature review	
How to research a topic	
How to write a research proposal	
How to develop my writing skills	
About myself as a learner	



Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Can you identify any barriers to your dissertation study?

Deciding on my topic	
Getting started	
Finding materials	
Structuring my time	
Understanding what is required	
Will I be able to do this?	

Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What best describes your view of the dissertation at the moment?

Excited to be studying a topic of my choice	
Looking forward to studying independently	
Don't know what I want to do.	
How will I get it all done	
It will enhance my professional development	

Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What skills do you think will help you do your dissertation?

Time Management skills	
Library Skills	
Ability to structure work	
IT skills	

Writing skills	
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Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. What do you think will help you with your dissertation?

Peer Group support	
Family / friend support	
Workshops	
Supervisions	
Practice Teacher	
Tutor	

Comments \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

We would like to thank you for completing this questionnaire. Can you please return this in the envelope provided.